

Rural EMS – The view from Cleora

My message to you here today is to PLEASE GET ON WITH IT!!! Rural EMS services continue to die all over Oklahoma from lack of funding. Our Cleora EMS – we call it CEMSA – was DEAD IN THE WATER For 9 months before we were able to bring it back to life!!!

Adjoining services began to take calls in our area and response times were sometimes an hour or more.

Our nice EMS station stood idle, two trucks in the garage. Paramedics bedrolls stored in the closets, awaiting their next shift.

Frozen meals in the refrigerator and worthless paychecks still waiting to be picked up.

We did make arrangements for Mercy EMS to utilize our station and provide service over summer holiday weekends. This effort paid off every time with a substantial number of runs needed

WHO ARE WE??

- **Cleora is a small unincorporated Delaware County community anchored by the Cleora school. The School District is bordered on the N by Craig County. The S border is formed by the N and E shores of Grand Lake. South Grand Lake and the Duck Creek area is the most developed area of**

Grand Lake. Over major summer holidays such as 4th of July, it is estimated that South Grand is the 3rd or 4th largest town in Oklahoma. Upwards of 100,000 people, ashore and afloat, watch the 4th of July fireworks on Duck Creek. Many of you here today have probably been a part of this. The city of Vinita is 20 miles N.

- **CEMSA and its parent, the Cleora Emergency Management Service District Trust was born out of a failed EMS election in Craig County in 2003.**
- **In the aftermath, local citizens produced 300+ signatures on an informal petition in a local convenience store. This provoked a formal effort by interested citizens and Cleora jumped thru all the Article 522 hoops – official, certified petition, coordination with both Craig and Delaware Counties, drafting the question and promoting the election and in November of 2004, the maximum 3 mil levy was approved by 85% of the voters!!**
- **We started operations from a temporary location and utilizing donated land and borrowed money we built a new EMS facility dedicated in May 2007.**
- **In the beginning, we partnered with Integris Grove General Hospital and based on projections furnished by them and their operator Grove EMS, our finances rested on three legs: 1/3 from our 3 mil levy, 1/3 from run collections, and 1/3 from a subsidy from the hospital. Grove EMS was our operator.**
- **After 3+ years of partnership with Integris Grove, trouble appeared on the horizon. We were given**

notice in December 2008 that they would no longer operate or support CEMSA.

- **We searched for a new operator and were able to negotiate a new contract with Integrity EMS who became our operator in February 2009.**
- **These contract negotiations and funding review with Integrity EMS revealed a serious problem: Our initial financial assumptions were wildly optimistic. Operating costs were far higher than projected and collections far lower. We volunteers had depended on information from entities with experience but their information proved to be simply wrong!!**
- **We promised Integrity EMS that we would make every effort to raise additional revenue and a strong campaign to “Save CEMSA” raised over \$50,000 in the Spring of 2009.**
- **Unfortunately, our downward slide continued. After 18 months of operation, Integrity EMS ran into financial difficulties and gave notice that they would cease operations. Luckily, we thought, Integrity found a buyer, Talon EMS and we were able to negotiate a new contract with them in December 2010.**
- **The day after signing our new contract on behalf of the CEMSA Trust, I was in a plane on the ramp at O’Hare airport and received a phone call from the Department of Health. Talon EMS had failed to pay for their insurance coverage and due to its cancellation, their license had been revoked immediately!!**

So...as I said at the beginning, after all of our efforts we were DEAD IN THE WATER!!!!

THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION

We mounted a search for a new operator but our best efforts produced nothing. We were now painfully aware that our available funding, even with active fundraising would not support 24/7 Paramedic service for our citizens.

Your legislative action with the passage of HB 1088 which became Title 9 provided a framework for regionalization of EMS service. You know, though it DID NOT provide any workable mechanism for funding.

But...we are extremely fortunate to have within the Cleora, Craig County and Vinita communities some individuals with the rare combination of 1) talented volunteer citizen effort and 2) elected officials with courage and the ability to look past city and county borders. Over the past spring and summer, this small group of people met many times and came to trust each other and craft an agreement which represented a victory for the entire region.

The result of these efforts has come to fruition and as of October 19th, Craig County, the City of Vinita and CEMSA began joint operations as REMAS – Regional Emergency Medical Ambulance Service. A single contract with a single operator, Mercy EMS. The

savings realized through combining operations makes the whole thing work!!!

THIS IS A MILESTONE IN OKLAHOMA EMS!!

Can similar agreements be reached in other regions?? Only time will tell but my personal opinion is that the willingness to “look over the fence” and trustful cooperation will prove to be rare.

For a minute, let’s explore a simple question:

IS THE RURAL EMS PROBLEM REALLY JUST RURAL??

Let me give you a few scenarios from the recent past:

When a vehicle ran off the icy Spring River bridge on I-44 last winter, we all saw the dramatic live video of the EMS response, rescue and recovery. Who responded and accomplished this almost impossible task?? Quapaw EMS and Miami EMS – both RURAL services.

When the terrible 10 fatality pileup N of Miami on I-44 occurred a couple of years ago, again the responding EMS services were Quapaw and Miami – both RURAL services.

When 100,000 plus people gather afloat and ashore on Grand Lake’s Duck Creek to view fireworks, who provides EMS coverage? Cleora EMS backed up by Vinita and MESTA EMS – all RURAL services.

When Governor Fallon spends the weekend at her place on Grand and Margaret Ehrling does the same at her place, who provides EMS coverage? ----well, you know the answer and I won't run this into the ground.

My point is pretty obvious, Rural EMS is NOT just a rural problem. It is a STATEWIDE problem and keeping our rural EMS services funded and operating is a STATE and by extension STATE LEGISLATURE problem.

WHAT ARE THE REAL NEEDS OF RURAL EMS??

WHAT DON'T WE NEED??? AND...WHAT DO WE NEED???

The DON'T list could be pretty long but I'll try to just make a simple statement. We DON'T need more stuff....more computers, reporting forms, checklists, conferences and seminars in far-away places – anything that takes up time and resources we don't have.

The DO list is extremely short. We need OPERATING FUNDS!!!! Funds sufficient to meet payroll, fill the tank, pay the electric bill and so on.

During the past couple of years, we have heard over and over that the tobacco settlement money could be used to help fund Rural EMS. I am personally NOT persuaded that the tobacco pie provides a long term stable source of funding. There seems to be a feeding frenzy over this pie from many health related organizations and we just don't have the clout to compete with all these well funded agencies.

LONG TERM, STABLE SOURCE OF FUNDING

Yes, that's what I said. I see from the attendees invited to this meeting that some others have arrived at the same solution that we have. EMSA in Tulsa and Oklahoma City has a long term, stable source of funding .. an earmarked surcharge on water bills. Rural Oklahoma doesn't have an integrated water utility to utilize. What we DO have is universal electric service, albeit from several providers. Sure, there are hurdles to jump in order to get this funding in operation. The Corporation Commission has a say, the Utilities themselves probably don't love the idea (although their employees would be direct beneficiaries in the field) and a vote of the people will probably be required.

And so, my message to you at the end of this talk is the same as it was in the beginning...

PLEASE GET ON WITH IT!!

Rural EMS services continue to die all over the state from lack of funding. Our CEMSA service was dead for 9 months before we were able to bring it back to life.

CRAFT A BILL AND GET IT PASSED THIS NEXT TERM!!!

Find the political courage to look past district boundaries and lobbyist efforts and do what is good for all of Oklahoma.

LIVES DO DEPEND ON IT!!
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